

Oral History Program: Biographical Notes

**George Alexander McRAE (1924 -)
Engineer**

- Birth & Family:** Born 17 April 1924 in Perth, Western Australia.
- Education:** Attended Perth Boys' School, attaining Junior Standard (also known as Sub-Leaving Standard) in 1939. Matriculated at Technical College in 1947; attended Perth University from 1948-51 (plus an external year).
- Qualifications:** BE (Hons), 1951
- Memberships:** FIEAust.
- Work History:** After leaving school, McRae put his age up to join the Army in 1940. In 1941, at the age of 17, he legitimately joined the Royal Australian Navy, where he served for 6 years.

At the end of the Second World War, following a Naval aptitude test, it was suggested to McRae that he take up Engineering. He completed the 5-year course at Perth University, which included an "external" year of work experience for students who were part of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (CRTS) and therefore regarded as mature age students.

McRae married his wife Jean in 1949.

In 1951 he joined the Commonwealth Department of Works in Perth, Western Australia, where he was engaged on investigation, design and supervision of construction of various works by both day labour and contract. Later he became Resident Engineer for the reconstruction of Perth Airport and the RAAF Base at Pearce, Western Australia, where he gained valuable experience in the construction of pavements. An unusual project was the construction of a radio beacon on Troughton Island off the north Kimberley Coast of Western Australia.

In 1956 McRae joined the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Authority where he was attached to the Roads Branch. As Road Pavement and Road Engineer he was involved in location, design and construction of access roads, thereby capitalising on his experience in pavement construction.

In 1958 McRae was part of a small group sent by the SMHEA to the United States Bureau of Reclamation in Denver, Colorado, for in-service training covering investigation, design and construction supervision of major civil engineering projects. McRae was assigned to the Glen Canyon Dam, a concrete wall dam on the Colorado River upstream from Boulder Dam.

Returning to Australia in 1959, McRae was sent to Cabramurra where he was appointed Engineer in Charge - Construction Works, designing and constructing access roads including the Link Road to Cabramurra, locating and constructing landing strips for aircraft, aqueduct pipelines and transmissions lines, and development of major works sites prior to letting contracts.

In 1960 McRae was transferred to the Geehi region for a project involving the simultaneous construction of the Khancoban township, works camps for 1,000 workers, as well as roads and access roads to various worksites such as the Geehi Dam and Murray One Power Station.

In 1961, the Authority was requested by the government to employ more people to combat the (then) high level of unemployment. Major works were brought ahead of schedule to boost workforce numbers, such as the excavation and diversion of Khancoban Creek for Murray One Power Station, the excavation for foundations of the Khancoban Dam and the pipeline bench for Murray One Power Station - an exposed pipeline built in very steep country. Field Construction carried out most of these extra projects and they were accomplished with the existing workforce, ahead of time and under budget.

McRae was promoted to Assistant Field Construction Engineer in 1963 and relocated to Cooma, where he was again involved with all aspects of the construction of a permanent township, this time Talbingo, and was also involved in the maintenance of the Authority's airfield at Polo Flat.

In 1964 McRae was involved in the overseas recruitment of skilled tradesmen for the Authority and other contractors, working closely with the Immigration Department.

Still with the Authority, McRae was responsible for the setting up, management and coordination of various Foreign Aid projects. These were in Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Western Samoa and Papua New Guinea, and included other projects as specified under the Foreign Affairs arrangements of the day. They were manned and organised from Cooma. Activities were eventually taken over by the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation (SMEC) created in 1970.

Because of his experience in working in steep hilly country, McRae was sent to Bougainville to work on a joint venture with CRA making recommendations and helping to build an access road to their copper mine.

McRae was appointed Convenor of the Snowy Mountains Authority's Safety Advisory Committee, which developed and implemented the industrial safety and occupational health policies. He also represented the Authority on the Industrial Safety Subcommittee of the Association of Electricity Generating Authorities.

The early 1970's also saw him involved in the reconstruction of Cabramurra, established on the site of the old camp.

In 1972 McRae became Director of Willing & Partners Pty Ltd and Manager of the ACT branch, dealing with government works and private consultancy work. In 1978 he became Director and General Manager of the company and was responsible for the business and financial direction of the practice and for coordinating activities of branch offices in Australia and New Guinea. The company was also involved in urban development projects with the National Capital Development Commission, and construction of major roads.

George McRae retired in 1992.